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OVERCOMING "DOOM AND GLOOM": EMPOWERING STUDENTS IN COURSES ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS, INJUSTICE, AND INEQUALITY*

In this paper, I use principles of civic education and social psychology to identify four main classroom contributors to students' pessimistic appraisals of their ability to improve social problems: authoritarian teaching methods, a culture of "doom and gloom," little attention to solutions to social problems, and no linkage of social problems to individual behavior. I then propose a five-step process to effectively teach about social problems while empowering students to help solve these problems: (1) identify the process through which social problems are constructed, (2) identify existence of the social problem, (3) identify core causes of the social problem, (4) identify structural solutions to the social problem, and (5) identify individual actions that contribute to structural solutions.

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"EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE IS getting worse" approaches [to teaching about social problems] are not only inaccurate, but they also imply nothing can be done and discourage students from attempts to improve the future. —J. John Palen, *Social Problems for the Twenty-First Century*

When we teach about social problems, do we empower our students to create social change or do we germinate cynicism, powerlessness, alienation, and civic disengagement? This paper illuminates how presentation techniques and classroom content affect students' motivation and ability to more

fully engage their outer world and proposes some pedagogical strategies for student empowerment.

PROBLEM: STUDENT CYNICISM AND APATHY

Many scholars (Bok 1990; Ehrlich 2000; Putnam 2001), foundations (Newman 1985), and civil society organizations (Council on Civil Society 1998; National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998) have expressed their concern regarding citizen apathy and civic disengagement. As a whole, these reports assert that if current downward trends in civic involvement continue, our political and social systems will be undermined, leading to general societal decline. Many worry that individualism and materialism have supplanted desire to contribute to one's community, that increasingly people only care about their immediate circle of family and friends and neglect their community, nation, and world.

Cynicism and apathy are commonly linked to civic disengagement (Jones, Haenfler, and Johnson 2001; Loeb 1999). Cynicism is a sort of ingrained pessimism about

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the world that involves an attitude of scornful or jaded negativity. The cynic has a general distrust of the integrity and professed motives of others (especially that of government officials, business leaders, and other figures of authority). Cynicism toward politicians is common in the United States. Sixty-four percent of young people agree that “government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, not for the benefit of all,” and 57 percent think “you can’t trust politicians because most are dishonest” (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999).

Apathy refers to a lack of interest or concern regarding the well being of the society. This includes a lack of interest in the existence and amelioration of social problems. Apathy often manifests itself in social disengagement, such as political withdrawal (e.g., voting or campaigning), disinterest in keeping informed of current events and social issues, and community withdrawal (e.g., from community service or building relationships with neighbors).

Survey research on college freshman conducted by the American Council on Education tends to support the contention that youth today are less idealistic and more materialistic than their previous counterparts. More than 80 percent of freshmen in the late 1960s endorsed “the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as their top value. “The importance of being very well off financially” ranked fifth or sixth. The highest value is now attributed to being very well off financially (71%) while developing a meaningful philosophy of life now occupies sixth place (41%) (Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney 1999:13).

Research also suggests that today’s youth are generally less civilly engaged than their previous counterparts. The proportion of college freshmen who feel it is important to keep up on political affairs was halved from 1966 to 1998 (58% to 26%, a record low) (Sax 2000). Voting rates for 18- to 24-year-olds have also mirrored the declines for the rest of the U.S. electorate (for adult trends see Austin and Club 1986 and U.S. Census

Bureau 2000; for youth trends see Jankowski and Elder 2001). Countering these trends, the percentage of college freshmen who performed volunteer work within the last year increased from 62 percent in 1989 to 74 percent in 1998, and more than half of those who volunteer do so on a weekly basis (Sax 2000). These seemingly conflicting trends among college freshmen are explained by their attitude that they can “make a difference” within their communities through volunteering but feel powerless to effect larger social change (Sax 2003:18).

CIVIC EDUCATION

Many scholars have posited civic education as a cure for student cynicism, apathy, and civic disengagement (Ehrlich 2000). Advocates of civic education assert that to empower students to become engaged citizens who can participate competently in a democratic society, educators must nurture two primary capacities: (1) the *values* and *motivation* to become civilly engaged and (2) the necessary *skills and knowledge* to become civic agents (Ehrlich 2000).

In civic education, the primary motivation for civic involvement is a sense of civic responsibility, which combines social concern for others and a moral duty to become involved in community and political affairs to try to better one’s surroundings. Civic responsibility urges one to keep informed of current events and social issues and to participate directly in the workings of civic and political institutions.

The desire for active citizenship does not in itself produce an effective citizen. The development of intellectual and social skills is necessary to increase the likelihood that an individual’s civic behaviors will actually contribute constructively to the larger society. These intellectual skills aid citizens in understanding complex social issues by analyzing and evaluating conflicting claims, evidence, and arguments. Other civic skills include the ability to express oneself orally and in writing to educate and persuade, the

ability to cooperate with others in civic activities, leadership skills, and the ability to solve complex problems (Moely et al. 2002).

Social Psychological Contributions to Civic Education

Since the ultimate goal of civic education is to encourage civic *action*, not just civilly minded *attitudes*, one must understand the factors that motivate human beings to act upon their attitudes. Even if someone has a strong sense of civic responsibility, several factors influence whether this sense of duty will translate into civic action. These factors include: the connection of civic duty to personal identity, the approval of peers, the perception of efficacy, the acceptance of personal responsibility (as compared to diffused responsibility), and the interpretation that a social problem or injustice exists (Wiggins, Wiggins, and Vander Zanden 1994).

A significant predictor of behavior is the conscious belief in one's ability to effectively perform a task and achieve a goal—that is, self-efficacy (Bandura 1997). A person with high self-efficacy believes that s/he is capable of accomplishing a goal and is subsequently more willing to pursue the activity and persevere when encountering difficulties. Actual ability to accomplish the goal is secondary to the individual's *perceived* ability to achieve the outcome (Bandura 1997). For civic education, this means that the likelihood that an individual will engage in civic action will increase when perceptions of effectiveness at "making a difference" increase.

As civic educators, we need to cultivate in our students not only a sense of civic responsibility and a set of civic skills but also a perception of personal civic efficacy. Self-efficacy is advanced through repeated experiences of successful performance as well as the anticipation of competent performance (Bandura 1997). This points to the importance of students performing civic actions, especially experiences they define as successful. Successful experiences in

civic action and learning about case studies of effective collective action can civilly empower students through the development of a sense that civic action can be effective and that they, as individuals, can effectively participate in their democracy.

"WHY ARE MY STUDENTS ALWAYS DEPRESSED WHEN THEY LEAVE MY SOCIOLOGY CLASS?"

Considering the complex causes of student attitudes and behaviors, such as influences from media, family, and peers, I assert that sociology classrooms too often unnecessarily create and perpetuate student cynicism and apathy. Many students leave their social problems courses with a deep understanding that social problems are not fleeting, random, or reducible to individual behavior but are enmeshed in the fabric of our society and are created by the daily workings of our cultural, economic, and political institutions. When this sociological understanding of social problems is coupled with a lack of civic empowerment, cynicism and apathy are likely to result.

Consider the following hypothetical student narratives:

Disengaged: "To tell you the truth, current events, politics, and the like just don't interest me. It's confusing, and if you try to worry too much about that stuff you just get depressed."

Do-gooder: "I don't know why we can't just work together and cooperate. We need to focus on helping each other instead of fighting all the time."

Cynic: "There's no point in trying to fix the problem, because our society is so rotten to the core that you might as well say 'fuck it' and at least try to have some fun while you can."

Social Change Agent: "Each of us has the responsibility to inform ourself about the world's complex problems and do something about them."

Figure 1 represents a matrix of two vari-

ables: knowledge of social issues and perceived civic efficacy. I assert that sociology courses often increase knowledge of social issues while they have no effect on, or decrease, students' levels of perceived civic efficacy (e.g., moving the “disengaged” student to “cynic”). I also assert that too often we take those with little knowledge of social issues, yet who feel civilly empowered (the “do-gooders”), and move them toward cynicism by “convincing” them that they cannot do anything about ingrained social problems. Sufficient data do not exist to systematically test my hypothesis, but research indicates that while commitment to social activism (civic responsibility) grows during college, students' perceived efficacy to create actual changes in society appears largely unchanged during college and the years after (Sax 2000:11).

Four Classroom Characteristics That Foster Student Cynicism and Apathy

Authoritarian teaching methods. Much has been written on authoritarian teaching methods under the rubrics of “radical,” “feminist,” and “critical pedagogy” (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Freire 1974; Maher and Tetreault 1994; Sweet 1996), so I will only comment briefly on this topic. Some top-down pedagogical tactics push knowledge upon the students and do not encourage knowledge criticism (or knowledge production). Freire (1974) refers to this model as the “banking model” of education, where teachers make knowledge deposits from lectures and textbooks and

students leave the class, in theory, with a vast array of deposited knowledge. Authoritarian classrooms often encourage students to look to the teacher for answers to simple and complex questions. This model of education fosters apathy (and discourages life-long learning) through its learned passivity, boredom, and disengagement. Many of the skills necessary for civic engagement (e.g., leadership, cooperation, and critical thinking) and the perception of civic efficacy are not cultivated through authoritarian teaching methods.

A culture of “doom and gloom.” Two of my first students commented on their course evaluations that I was “very negative about everything” and “a more open mind on modernism would be nice.” I think they were right, and I do not think I was acting alone in this regard. Examples of social progress are often few and far between in the social problems classroom. I venture that one of the main reasons for this negativity is that teachers worry that giving examples of positive change implies that social problems are somehow easy to solve, will fix themselves over time, or are “really not that bad.” If a teacher says that the political system is significantly more racially just than in the 1960s, students may perceive that racism is no longer a problem. This mindset also pervades social movement organizations as they carefully frame their advocacy campaigns to motivate social action.

A culture of negativity or pessimism has also emerged in the discipline of sociology; the tendency is to stress the negative or unfavorable or to take the gloomiest possible view. Joel Best (2001) argues that this culture is based on four dynamics: (1) a belief in social perfectibility highlights failures to achieve perfection, (2) solving big problems makes formerly smaller problem seem large (e.g., slavery versus subtle forms of racism), (3) social progress encourages the recognition of a larger number of social problems (e.g., heterosexism was not considered a “social problem” by most sociologists in 1900), and (4) a nagging sense that

Figure 1. Relationships between Knowledge of Social Issues and Perceived Civic Efficacy

		Perceived Civic Efficacy	
		HIGH	LOW
Knowledge of Social Issues	HIGH	Social Change Agent	Cynic
	LOW	Do-gooder (Volunteer)	Disengaged

social progress may lead to an unforeseen social collapse.

A social problems course exists at almost all colleges and universities while the topic of social progress is often neglected across the sociological curriculum. I do not mean to imply that teachers should have a blindly optimistic view of the world, but it seems that blind pessimism is too often seen as a realistic, sophisticated, and intellectually refined view of the world among many academics. Hope is often seen as quaint, religious, and naïve. This culture of pessimism encourages cynicism as a more rational, objective, and even more scientifically founded attitude than hopeful informed action to make the world a better place.

Little attention to solutions to social problems. In our frantic attempt to cover enough information about each of the 5 to 15 different social problems that are standard fare for such courses, we often neglect the opportunity to challenge students to develop solutions to these social problems. Solutions to social problems are often relegated to the brief end of chapters and end of classes where they are given little attention or academic rigor. Without adequate coverage of structural solutions many students are left feeling that the world is a terribly unjust place—full of powerful people who use their advantage to exploit others and retain their power—and that it cannot be realistically changed for the better.

To help determine the extent to which solutions are covered in social problems courses, I analyzed the 13 syllabi in the *Instructor's Resource Manual on Social Problems* (Kaelber and Carroll 2001). I studied course descriptions, objectives, reading lists, topic schedules, and assignments. One drawback of using this dataset is that it is possible (or even likely) that additional content on solutions is included in a course that is not reflected in the curricular materials submitted to this ASA resource.

Keeping limitations in mind, I determined that four teachers (31%) systematically incorporated the evaluation and/or generation

of solutions into their courses. Two of these instructors incorporated the use of a text that was solution-focused. Also, two of these instructors used final projects to address the creation and evaluation of solutions. Four other teachers (31%) addressed solutions but did so in a less systematic manner. For example, two teachers included a “solutions” day toward the end of the semester; and two teachers mentioned the assessment of various policy solutions in their course objectives, though it was difficult to determine how they integrated it into the course. Five teachers (38%) provided little or no evidence of the topic of solutions in their courses. Two of these teachers focused on the constructionist¹ approach to teaching social problems and the critical evaluation of social problem claims. I hypothesize that constructionist approaches that neglect solutions do not create as much cynicism as objectivist approaches that neglect solutions. The constructionist approach often does not “pile” problem after problem upon students because it often encourages the investigation of irrational factors (e.g., moral panics) that often exaggerate the prevalence or seriousness of “social problems” (e.g., coffee drinking or witchcraft).

I assert that many teachers prefer to avoid (or minimize) discussion of solutions be-

¹The objectivist approach to studying social problems—common within functionalism, feminism, and Marxism—focuses on the discovery of objective social conditions that produce social problems. This paradigm is often enacted in the classroom through the expert's (i.e., teacher's) selection and analysis of specific social problems. The constructionist (or subjectivist) approach to studying social problems (Spector and Kitsuse 1977), including symbolic interactionism, focuses on the “process by which a society comes to recognize its social problems” (Blumer 1971:300). Using the constructionist approach, teachers of social problems focus on uncovering the *process* by which social problems are constructed and contested. The critical constructionist perspective on social problems (Heiner 2002) seeks a synthesis of critical social science and social constructionism.

cause they perceive solutions to be excessively value-laden (as compared to problems). They may fear that talking about solutions will open up contentious or hot issues in the classrooms that are more challenging to facilitate as a teacher. Others may feel that it is inappropriate to “tell students what I think,” that students should make up their own minds about what should be done about social problems. I suspect that problems are often seen as objectively analyzed with a mindset of value-neutrality while solutions are often seen as biased, too “touchy feely,” or too non-scientific to be addressed in the classroom (for a brief yet profound critique of value-neutrality in the classroom see O’Brien and Howard 1996).

I agree that addressing solutions to social problems is a value-laden endeavor—as is addressing social problems. Social problems do not “naturally” emerge from the social landscape. Academics, interest groups, social service professionals, and politicians construct, frame, and attach symbolic meaning to certain social phenomena. These processes help shape which social problems are chosen for inclusion in class material, how the social problem is analyzed, and which courses of action should be considered.

No linkage of social problems to individual behavior. Many sociologists neglect to connect individual behavior to the existence and perpetuation of social problems. My content analysis of syllabi in the *Instructor’s Resource Manual on Social Problems* (Kaelber and Carroll 2001) indicates that one teacher (8%) explicitly addressed individual behavior through an optional service learning project. I inferred that two other teachers (15%) most likely addressed individual behavior based on certain reading selections and statements in their syllabi. Ten teachers (77%) made no indications that individual behavior would be addressed.

I hypothesize that one reason that teachers so often neglect individual behavior is the fear that by emphasizing individual behavior they will undermine a core premise of soci-

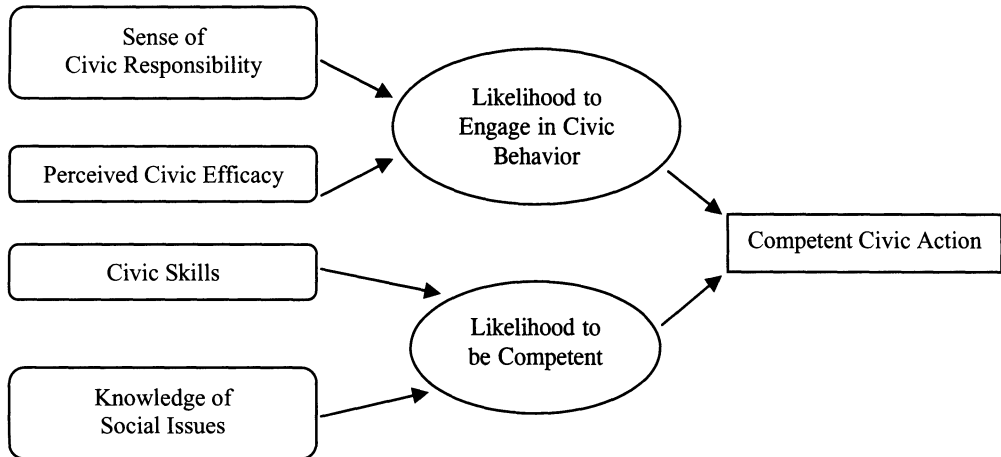
ology, that our field of study is social patterns not individual behavior. Another reason teachers might neglect the role of individual behavior as it relates to social problems is the wariness about “telling students how they should live.” This is an important consideration, but even if a teacher does not explicitly address “how one should live” in the social problems classroom then the teacher definitely already implies it through readings, lectures, and videos. At the very least, teachers imply to students that “you shouldn’t be part of the problem” or “obviously you should do something about all of these injustices.” Neglecting the connection between social problems and individual behavior obscures the impact that individuals have on replicating and changing social structures.

SOLUTION: SOCIALLY EMPOWERING AND SOCIOLOGICALLY GROUNDED EDUCATION

One of the primary goals for undergraduate sociology should be to empower students in their abilities to contribute constructively to their communities and the larger society. I propose that the path to accomplish this goal is to more consciously nurture four capacities in our students: (1) civic responsibility, (2) perceived civic efficacy, (3) civic skills, and (4) knowledge about society (see Figure 2).

We as teachers of sociology have the responsibility to teach that social problems are deeply rooted in the fabric of our society *and* to teach this important lesson in a manner that does not create unnecessary amounts of pessimism, cynicism, and apathy in our students. This pedagogical goal requires a balancing process. If we focus too little on civic empowerment we foster cynicism in our students. Yet if we focus too much on civic empowerment, we foster naïve expectations about one’s ability to ameliorate social problems and send an inaccurate message of the nature and causes of social problems.

To achieve this “balance,” scholars in

Figure 2. Student Capacities

Teaching Sociology have advocated implementing a broad array of pedagogical tools, including: service learning (Myers-Lipton 1998; Rundblad 1998), community research (Rundblad 1998), “positive deviance” (Jones 1998), lessening teacher cynicism (Newman 1991), activist guest speakers (Moulder 1997), direct student participation in civic groups (Batur-VanderLippe 1999), evaluation of the effectiveness of social movement organizations (Cornelius 1998), student-led social action (Moulder 1997; Netting 1994; Solorzano 1989), student-centered or active learning (Cornelius 1998; Rundblad 1998; Sweet 1996), and class readings that advocate social action (Moulder 1997).

Five-Step Teaching Process

To find the right balance between empowering and educating students, I propose the following five-step process to teach about social problems and injustices. This process is a broad guide that can be implemented within a variety of theoretical perspectives, including objectivist and constructionist notions of social problems. The process is flexible enough to incorporate any of the above-mentioned teaching tools (e.g., service learning or student projects).

Step One: Identify the process through

which social problems are constructed

Step Two: Identify existence of the social problem

Step Three: Identify core causes of the social problem

Step Four: Identify structural solutions to the social problem

Step Five: Identify individual actions that contribute to structural solutions

Each step builds upon the work of the previous steps. Based on my content analysis, it appears that most teachers of social problems address Steps Two and Three quite thoroughly. Many only briefly cover Steps One and Four while most never address Step Five. I assert that this systematic omission of Steps Four and Five is a main contributor to student cynicism in the sociology classroom. In the following explanation of each step I highlight common pitfalls and provide suggestions for how to implement the step in an empowering manner in the classroom (see Appendix A for the application of this process to economic inequality).

Step One: Identify the process through

which social problems are constructed. It is important to introduce the role that theoretical perspectives and value-positions play in defining social problems (and social reality in general). The use of different *perspectives* leads to the “seeing” of different *problems*. Functionalism, Marxism, and feminism all provide unique lenses through which to interpret the world.

Students should learn the processes through which social reality is shaped. Social movement organizations and other claims-makers play an integral role in this process as they advocate competing interpretations of reality. These definitional contests play out within the media, government, academia, and other social institutions to influence policymakers and the general public. This process occurs within a system where social power is inequitably distributed. Therefore, the ability to be heard, understood, and ultimately influential is not equally shared.

Teachers should encourage students to identify the role that values play in interpreting the world. One way to accomplish this goal is to create opportunities for students to identify their own values and apply them to course material. Students should be encouraged to interrogate their own values and move from a state of *dualism*—where they consider their values to be right and others to be wrong—toward a state of *committed relativism* where they recognize the limitations of their own value-positions yet consciously build upon them (Perry 1970).

Differences of opinion often arise in the classroom regarding the existence, causes, and solutions to social problems. Some differences are based on factual matters while others are based on competing values. Teachers need to decide how best to address these differences while considering practical (e.g., time) and philosophical (e.g., the nature of reality and knowledge) issues. To begin, it is essential that teachers determine which value-positions influence their courses and be intellectually honest with their students about this issue. I encourage teachers to find a balance between validat-

ing and challenging students’ arguments and value-positions. This goal can be accomplished by (1) facilitating an open debate to assess the validity of various value-positions, (2) announcing that the course will be taught from a certain set of value-positions or perspectives (e.g., the conflict perspective, feminism, or functionalism) but that other positions are welcomed to be expressed, and/or (3) allowing students to individually study social problems based on their own value positions (while, of course, using social scientific methods) (see Appendix B for a research paper assignment based on this proposition).

Step Two: Identify existence of the social problem. Through the use of readings, lectures, videos, and discussions, this step presents concepts and evidence of specific social problems. Concepts such as inequality, discrimination, crime, environmental racism, prejudice, and patriarchy are introduced along with evidence that helps support the argument that these social problems exist. This evidence includes: statistics on growing income inequality, percentage of women in parliaments around the globe, racial disparities in household wealth, rates of violence against gays and lesbians, premature deaths caused by air pollution, and ethnographies of public school disparities. Most teachers (and textbooks) thoroughly and effectively address this step.

As teachers of sociology we sometimes try so hard to convince our students of the severity of social problems that we make exaggerated claims, such as “racial inequality is worse today than it was during times of slavery” or any number of claims that boil down to “the world may have improved in small ways but it’s still a horrible place and let me convince you why.” Do not exaggerate the magnitude of a social problem. This overwhelms students and leads them to doubt your sincerity or scholarship. Be willing to point out historical examples of social gains based on social action (e.g., desegregation based on lunch counter sit-ins and other acts of civil disobedience, suffragettes and women gaining the right to vote, dis-

ability advocates and increased access to public buildings, gay and lesbian movements and increased acceptance of homosexuality) (see Appendix C for examples of empowering videos).

Step Three: Identify core causes of the social problem. This step introduces evidence and theories regarding the causes of the social problem covered in Step Two. This process helps students understand the social dynamics of social problems, how and why these problems come about (and are constructed and framed) and how they are changed and transformed through social institutions and cultural trends. Another key sociological skill is the ability to recognize the difference between the symptoms and the root causes of social problems.

This step is essential to the sociological learning process as it teaches students that social problems are not random, fleeting, or reducible to individual behavior. To some extent, student pessimism about the world is a testament to our effectiveness in this step—if that pessimism comes from a sense that social problems are complex, historically and structurally rooted, and resistant to change. Unfortunately, many teachers portray the causes of social problems as so systemic that the teacher overwhelms students into thinking that nothing can be done individually or collectively to ameliorate the problem. Do not let your desire to explain the rootedness of social problems imply that nothing can be done to help alleviate the problems. Try to avoid coming across with the impression that “well, the world is really screwed up and that’s just the way the world is...so we might as well do nothing about it.”

Step Four: Identify structural solutions to the social problem. Many classes that are “problem-focused” often stop with Step Three. These classes are especially disempowering to students because possible solutions are never discussed, often leaving students with the impression that nothing can be done to improve the world or that their professor just likes to complain about the world. Vague, revolutionary rhetoric does

not solve the problem either. Advocating a “proletarian revolution” or the “systematic dismantling of patriarchal systems” can stymie action on the part of the students (and often the professor) because the solution is so radical and total that any action you choose would be too small to bring it about.

I propose that students are more open to listening to what sociologists have to say when we present some practical structural and individual/lifestyle solutions to social problems. Many human beings do not want to hear about a social problem if they perceive there are no viable solutions to that problem. To deal with this psychological tension, many students write off the social criticisms of their professors so they do not have to take on the psychological baggage of believing in a depressing phenomenon that cannot be changed.

Take the causes of the social problem from Step Three and address how these causes could be addressed. One tactic is to have students brainstorm possible solutions as individuals or groups. Start students off with, “Keeping in mind the structural causes we talked about for [a social problem], what is a possible solution?” After they generate some ideas, have them create more concrete ideas about how that solution could be implemented. Then have students evaluate the potential effectiveness of the measure (e.g., who would be for it? who would be against it? would it work? what are the obstacles to implementation?). Another tactic is to present readings or videos that illustrate proposed solutions to a social problem and then have students evaluate each solution’s effectiveness (see Appendix D for ideas).

If during this step students generate utopian solutions such as “we need to love each other more,” challenge them to create middle-level solutions to get us there (e.g., we need to culturally reinforce the value of loving parenting, institute a national parental leave program, or create more racially integrated neighborhoods). Addressing solutions also sets up a great environment to

discuss the difference between the core causes and symptoms of social problems. To what extent do increased punishments address the core causes of crime? To what extent do homeless shelters or the National Low Income Housing Coalition address the core causes of homelessness?

Another way for students to learn about the possibilities for social change is to expose students to social change organizations within your community. This can be accomplished through field trips, guest speakers, class projects, or service learning. These experiences can build civic skills and improve students' perceptions of their abilities to effectively contribute to their society. Last semester my class took a “toxic tour” led by a grassroots environmental justice organization in a large metropolitan area. I received much feedback similar to this student's response: “These kind of experiences can be turning points in student's lives and encourage them to become active in their own lives in the pursuit of positive global change.”

Creating solutions to social problems is a challenging task that is immensely important within civil society. As teachers, we do not need to reach a consensus in our classroom on the solutions to social problems, but we are remiss if we do not play a more constructive role in our students' capacity to generate and evaluate these solutions. Discussing solutions with students empowers them to think what a “better world” means to them and challenges them to come up with actual paths to its existence.

Step Five: Identify individual actions that contribute to structural solutions. This step links personal action to the structural solutions determined in Step Four. I favor explicit discussion of individual actions for two main reasons. First, it can help illuminate the connection between agency and structure; that social institutions are created, recreated, and transformed through human action. Second, it opens up the topic of “right livelihood,” or how one should live, for discussion and debate in class; it rises from the unquestioned, taken-for-granted

realm. Many students are at an important moral crossroads in their lives where they are looking to explore these issues.

Consider asking your students some of the following questions: what responsibility do you have to help solve social problems? How might you help bring about some of the structural solutions we have discussed? What would the average person need to be doing on a daily basis to bring about these structural solutions? (see Appendix E for readings on civic responsibility)

Be sure to challenge students to brainstorm individual daily actions that are sociologically informed, meaning ones that would actually address the core causes of the social problem(s) (see Appendix F for suggested readings). In other words, move students beyond “random acts of kindness” or acts of charity that may address specific symptoms of social problems but are not directly linked to structural solutions. One example is to have students compare the social impacts of giving change to a person on the street, volunteering at a homeless shelter, advocating for local affordable housing, and opening a checking account at a community development bank (see Jones et al. 2001:55-60 or communityinvest.org for information on community development financial institutions). Find a way to challenge students to look at the structural causes of the problem without shooting down their ambition to help others. Also encourage your students to realistically consider what they would be *willing* to do about social problems while considering other demands on their time and energy.

Another way for teachers to implement this step is to explicitly incorporate the building of civic skills into the curriculum. Service learning has the most potential for building these skills as students engage their communities through sustained volunteer work and academic reflection (see Appendix G for resources). Another less labor-intensive endeavor is to assign letter writing regarding social issues to government leaders, corporate executives, or editors of periodicals.

Inspire students to live in a manner that supports their desires for a more just and compassionate world. Convince them that they can live lives that are fun, fulfilling, meaningful, and still contribute to the lives of others. There is no need to make a choice between happiness *and* "saving the world." The end of the semester presents a great opportunity to encourage students to take the ideas of the course and apply them to their lives. Share with them your hopes for what they might take from the class.

ASSESSMENT

To examine the impact of the above five-step teaching process on student empowerment, I analyzed student comments about my social problems-oriented courses. Many of the student comments come from a large lecture-based course on inequality/stratification while others come from a smaller discussion-based course on nonviolence and social action.

Most of the data on student attitudes was collected from anonymous course evaluations. Other data were gathered from unsolicited e-mails and letters sent to me by students (often months after their course was completed) regarding the impact that the course(s) had on them. While understanding the limitations of this data set, my findings suggest that implementing steps four and five (along with addressing steps one through three in an empowering manner) encourages civic responsibility and perceived civic efficacy among students. Unfortunately my data cannot speak to the long-term impacts upon student civic attitudes and behaviors.

Many students indicated that the most effective aspect of the course was its positive impact on their level of civic responsibility and their motivation to act upon this notion. The following comments about the most effective aspects of the course reflect this sentiment: "the encouragement [is] given to try to make the world a better place rather than just complaining about problems in society and doing nothing about them,"

"[the course] challenges you to want to be a better person. Makes you think about the things you do/don't do and how those relate to the rest of the world," "I understand the reason behind protesting and why we need to take action to 'save the world'... and without these courses I would have sat back in complete ignorance, watching the world go by," and "[the course has the] ability to motivate you to get out and make a change."

This teaching process also appears to be effective in enhancing some students' perceptions of their abilities to create social change. Two students commented on their course by writing, "I see the world as a place that I can change now as opposed to just a big bad mean place," and "[It] makes me hopeful and shows me that even I can make a positive difference." Many students also expressed an excitement regarding learning "how to become involved" and "how a person can help." Many also expressed being inspired by the course: "[he most effective part of the course was] how we are focused on positive change and a better world through activism." Others commented that their course was a "wonderfully inspiring class" and that "it really opened my vision for the future." One student commented on her newfound hope by saying, "I always had a flame until 9-11, when I decided to ignore my world beyond my backyard. This class has reignited my flame and I feel inspired, again, to make a difference." Many students also favorably commented on the positivity of their course: "The energy for social action is good to be around," and "my perception of society's purpose in much more positive now."

Encouraging student introspection upon their own value-positions also appears to benefit students. This process of self-exploration regarding social problems has led students to comment that the course "challenges me to think about my beliefs/morals" and "made me focus on what I want my role in the world to be. I can honestly say that this class will mean more

down the line in my life than most others.” Another student commented that the course helped students to “reevaluate what’s truly important in their lives—how they want to spend the rest of their lives—how they will contribute to society—and what they, as individuals, can do to make the world a better place.”

Surprisingly, these comments did not come from courses that focused on the progress of modern society or ones that incorporated service learning or other more unconventional methods of student empowerment. I taught these courses from a critical, social-justice perspective in a rather conventional manner. These results suggest that positive student outcomes can result from even small shifts of curriculum by briefly addressing Steps Four and Five and avoiding excessive negativity while addressing Steps One through Three.

CONCLUSION

To more consciously contribute to our students’ civic abilities and motivation, I encourage further research on the causes of student cynicism and empowerment related to social problems. Further scholarship on teaching and learning can empirically evaluate this link between the actions of teachers and the impacts upon students regarding social action. As teachers of sociology we do not have to accept student cynicism as a natural byproduct of learning about social problems. If we want to nurture the capacities within our students to contribute constructively to their communities and to the larger society, we must take responsibility for the ways in which we influence our students.

As teachers of sociology, we have the potential to contribute to our students’ lives in many ways. We can enhance their self-knowledge. We can provide opportunities to explore the potential of serving others. We can help them develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of the world. We can ultimately nourish the realization that they have the power to help transform so-

cial institutions and create a more just and compassionate world. I encourage you to embrace this potential through the mindful reconstruction of your classroom interactions and your selection of assignments, videos, readings, and lectures.

APPENDIX A

BRIEF APPLICATION OF THE PROCESS TO ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Problem Existence (Step Two): statistics on wealth and income inequality and its effects, unsafe working conditions; introduce concepts of social class, exploitation, and stratification

Causes (Step Three): decline of unions, increased money in elections, corporate concentration of wealth, tax laws, global mobilization of capital, and competitive pressure for low prices

Solutions (Step Four): independent unions, alternative economic institutions that create wealth for the poor, removing influence of wealth in politics, independent monitoring of overseas factories

Individual Actions (Step Five): investing in community development, writing letters to politicians regarding tax policy, joining an organization, buying “fair trade” goods, supporting boycotts

APPENDIX B

SOCIAL CHANGE PAPER

- Research evidence of the existence and causes of a social problem that is especially important to you. It does not have to be one we have covered in this class.
- Research an organization whose mission is to help solve that problem (it can be a local, state, national, or international organization). Detail relevant goals and campaigns.
- Assess the potential effectiveness the organization may have in solving the social problem.
- Optional: get involved with the group and start creating social change.

APPENDIX C

EMPOWERING VIDEOS

A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. 180 minutes. 2002. Produced by York Zimmerman. (www.aforcemorepowerful.org). Recounts nonviolent campaigns for Indian independence from Britain, desegregating

Nashville, and overcoming apartheid.

Justice for Sale. 60 min. 1999. Episode of *Frontline*. Produced by WGBH. (www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/justice). Fifteen-minute segment (15:00-30:00) highlights the successful efforts of a grassroots organization to keep a polluting plant out of their community in Convent, Louisiana.

Occupation: The Story of the Harvard Living Wage Sit-in. 44 min. 2002. Produced by En-Masse Films. (www.enmassefilms.org). Recounts student occupation of a Harvard University building to successfully gain wage increases for campus janitors and food service workers.

APPENDIX D

RESOURCES FOR EVALUATING SOLUTIONS TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Eitzen, D. Stanley and Craig Leedham. 2004. *Solutions to Social Problems: Lessons from Other Societies*, 3d ed. Allyn and Bacon. Provides case studies of progressive solutions to various social problems, mostly from Europe.

Goodman, David. 1999. "America's Newest Class War." *Mother Jones* September/October.

(www.motherjones.com/mother_jones/SO99/goodman.html). Recounts Vermont's attempt at equalizing public school funding and the response of various social groups.

Korten, David. 1999. *The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism*. Co-published by Berrett-Koehler and Kumarian. Addresses problems of corporate capitalism and advocates a more just and ecologically sustainable economic system, highlighting paths to its fruition.

Visionaries. 30 min. Produced by Visionaries, Inc. (www.visionaries.org). Documentary series that highlights one grassroots social change project for each 30-minute program. Examples include a fair trade coffee program, economic redevelopment of inner cities, and the Boston Gay Men's Chorus.

APPENDIX E

READINGS ON CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Frazier, Ian. 2001. "Tilting at Tree Bags." *Mother Jones* January/February. (www.motherjones.com/mother_jones/JF01/treebags.html). Story of one man's attempt to improve his community.

Loeb, Paul Rogat. 1999. *Soul of a Citizen: Liv-*

ing With Conviction in a Cynical Time. New York: St. Martin's Griffin. Inspiring book about the personal and societal potential of committed civic action.

APPENDIX F

READINGS FOR SOCIOLOGICALLY INFORMED INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

Co-op America's Guide to Ending Sweatshops. 21 pages (bulk rates from \$1.25-3.00/copy). (www.sweatshops.org) or 1-800-58-GREEN. Addresses causes of exploitative working conditions, independent labor monitors, and fairly traded products. Additional guide available regarding community investing.

Jones, Ellis, Ross Haenfler, and Brett Johnson. 2001. *The Better World Handbook: From Good Intentions to Everyday Actions*. New Society. (www.betterworldhandbook.com). Comprised of daily actions based on Seven Foundations for a Better World. Actions include socially responsible investing, alternative media, energy conservation, and nonviolent parenting.

Kivel, Paul. 2002. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Rev. ed. New Society.

APPENDIX G

SERVICE LEARNING RESOURCES

Campus Compact. (www.compact.org).

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. (www.servicelearning.org).

Kowalewski, Brenda Marsteller, Morten G. Ender, and JoAnn DeFiore, eds. 2001. *Service-Learning and Undergraduate Sociology: Syllabi and Instructional Materials*. 2d ed. ASA. (<http://www.asanet.org/pubs/cddm.html>).

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